

A BIPEDAL REPTILE IN NEVADA
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Accounts of bipedal reptiles (“dinosaur”-like or otherwise) have been sporadically reported in North America for many years. Most sightings come from western states, and many have been collected and documented over the last few years by Nick Sucik and myself (Sucik 2006; Arment 2008). Nick has had opportunity to travel to several regions with alleged sightings, and has interacted with local news sources in an attempt to solicit further witnesses.

In December 2009, Nick was contacted by a witness (JF) who had read an online newspaper article about his research. JF’s initial email included the following (lightly edited):

“My daughter and I were held in amazement on June 28th, 2009. It was 5:50pm. (I know because we needed to get gas with cash and the station closes at 6:00. The attendant was on his way out the door, cash box in hand when we pulled in!) The day was warm and sunny, with a slight breeze from the southwest. What we saw was not a bird, but a bipedal, reptilian animal with a few bird type features. It was very small, the size of a chukar, with strong looking back legs, frilly plume-looking feather things on places, two fore legs with small claws, little spaced teeth, a tail about half as long as it was that it carried just above ground height. But, the one thing I remember thinking remarkable was it did a full basketball player pivot when it turned to run. It’s no emu chick or monitor lizard. It was 20 feet away in full

sun. Beautiful. ... We know it sounds crazy and I guess I wish it had happened to someone else! But any info would be appreciated."

At the time, circumstances did not allow Nick to immediately respond, so he asked me to get in touch with her. I spoke with JF on the phone for over an hour, and she impressed me as knowledgeable, curious, and excited to talk to someone about the incident without being ridiculed.

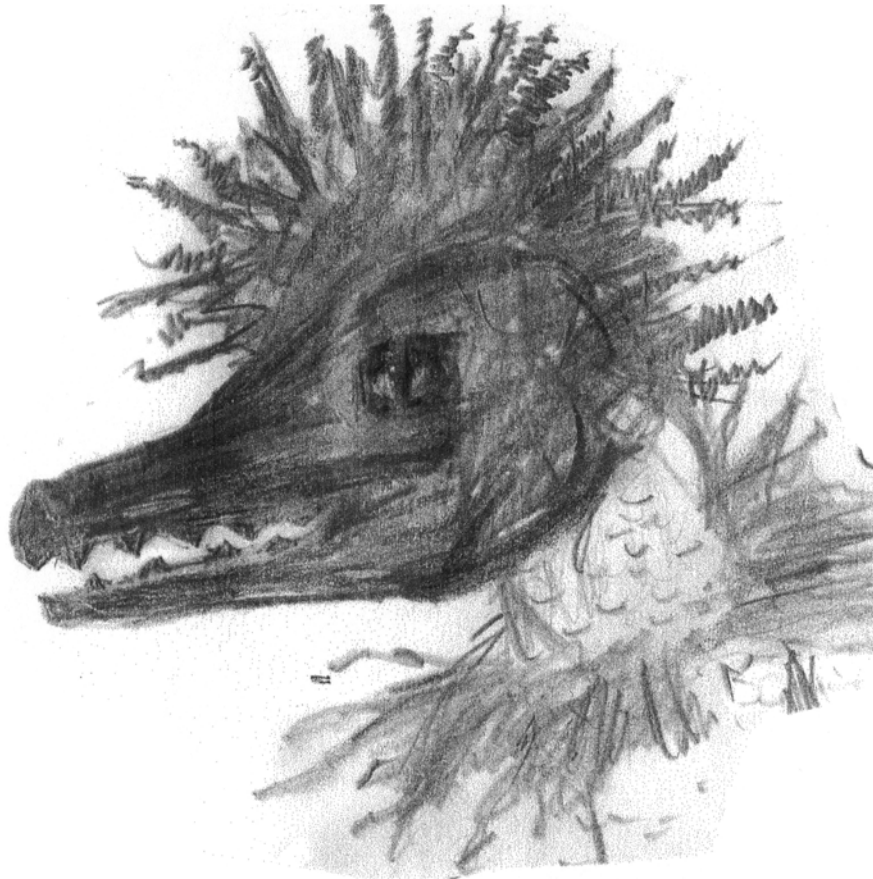
JF is a California schoolteacher, and she and her husband had bought land up in the Nevada mountains to build a cabin. They had been taking trips there for the last year or so, camping on the property. This trip, she and her daughter were alone, coming back in the middle of the day. They were heading south just outside the town of Gerlach, Nevada. Gerlach is in east-central Washoe County. Gerlach is a very small town in a sparsely inhabited part of the state. The only time they get many visitors is when the annual week-long Burning Man festival is held nearby.

Her daughter had just rolled down the windows to air the car out due to some dog hair coming through the vents, and JF slowed down as they reached a large curve in the road. She saw a large rabbit lying dead in the middle of the opposite lane. (She didn't see any signs that the animal had been hit, but described it as looking like it had just sat down, rolled over, and died.) She was only going about 15 mph at this time, when she saw this rabbit and thought it was strange that it hadn't been picked off by scavengers. Then she saw a reptilian head pop up from the opposite side of the rabbit—it had its eyes closed and its mouth open. She was barely going at a crawl by this time, and was about 20 feet away with the sun directly behind her, so she had a very good look at the animal.

It opened its eyes, saw the truck, threw its forelegs up into the air, pivoted and dashed off into the sagebrush. Her daughter, sitting next to her, looked out the back and watched it disappear as they drove past, saying, "That's not a bird!" JF had slowed down



WITNESS' SKETCH, USED WITH PERMISSION.



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when she saw the animal, thinking “it was cute at first,” but when it ran off, “it wasn’t cute anymore,” so she didn’t stop.

She described it as approximate 15 to 18 inches tall when standing upright, with a similar length. (She said that it would have had trouble dragging off the rabbit.) The tail was kangaroo-like, more like a rudder than a long whip-like tail. The tail stood straight out, balancing, as it ran. The head was reptilian, but not narrow in snout (so, not like a caiman), and lacking a beak. The head was about the size of a chihuahua’s head. The neck wasn’t very long. Its mouth being open, she noted 4-6 small triangular teeth on each side, sort of separated between. The eye was yellow, and she noticed the pupil was vertical (up and down) in orientation. She didn’t notice the hands herself, but her daughter said they had small fingers and claws. The arms were long enough to reach the head, and had some musculature, but didn’t look like they’d be used quadrupedally. The hind legs were stout and muscular, but she didn’t see the feet. She didn’t notice any scales, and the skin seemed smooth.

The head and body seemed to be covered with fluffy spiky tassel-like hairs or feathers. They were sort of stiff but flexible (but not like down). The wind was blowing and parted the hairs on the head “like an Afro.” The coloration of the hairs seemed to match that of the body: the head was burgundy-reddish in color, while the body was a light tan to pearlescent green. She thought it was really pretty. As soon as it dashed off into the sagebrush, the colors blended in like perfect camouflage, and the spiky hairs helped it disappear into the surrounding sparse brush.

She said it didn’t act like a normal lizard, as it seemed more aware and wary of them than lizards would be.

JF is a schoolteacher (and her parents were biology teachers), she has neighbors who keep emus, and she keeps chickens, and she is familiar with a variety of birds and reptiles. She said this clearly wasn’t anything she recognized. She said the locals in the town never go out into the desert except to hunt. She noted it is pretty cold there in winter, and very hot in the summer.

When evaluating an eyewitness account of a strange animal, the investigator must keep in mind several possibilities:

- 1) The witness was truthful and accurately presented details.
- 2) The witness was truthful, but may have reported inaccurate or mistaken details.
- 3) The witness was not truthful, and deliberately provided incorrect details.

No investigator wants to be hoaxed, so we look at this possibility first. To counter this, we have several lines of evidence. First, the witness isn't anonymous. She provided Nick and I with full contact information. Second, she wasn't seeking out media attention. She had looked online to see if there were similar reports, and posted her story to at least one page, but she said some of the UFO/Creature sites she looked at were too weird for her, so she didn't do more along those lines. Third, as I spoke with her, she first told her story almost nonstop for forty minutes, barely stopping to recall anything, before I began asking questions. This is a good indication that the sighting actually took place and wasn't made up as she went along. Fourth, she didn't jump to the most controversial possible identity for this animal—dinosaurian. She thought it might just be some kind of strange lizard, though she was familiar with common species like collared lizards, and said it wasn't similar to them. I am certain that JF is not attempting a hoax. Speaking with her again, almost a year after my initial contact, she is still very interested in anything that can be learned about this animal.

Regarding the possibility of inaccurate details, relying on human memory is always tricky. In this case, there were two witnesses, and both immediately recognized the unusual nature of the animal. They made a sketch of the animal after arriving home, in order to keep from forgetting details. They saw the animal in good light from not too far a distance, but of course, we have to weigh surprise as a possible influence on both memory and interpretation of details when the animal was first seen. (In this case, at least,

there was no fear of the creature. JF's first thought was that it was cute, not scary.)

The potential for misidentification can never be ruled out, though there doesn't appear to be a reasonable candidate that immediately stands out. I don't think a known native lizard is likely, and even exotics like varanids are not a good fit. A bird would be more likely than a lizard. I would like to see more than an *ad hoc* proposal stretching to fit a "foregone" conclusion, however. For now, I consider this a legitimate cryptozoological sighting.

Of course, even if we assume that a witness is accurate in most details, this doesn't identify or scientifically describe a creature. It just gives us a few more clues that could be worth following up in order to find enough evidence to physically confirm it as a new (and perhaps surprising) species. The points of particular interest in this case include aspects of diet (scavenging), appearance (ability to camouflage itself with both color and morphological characters), and posture (the rudder-like tail). And if it does represent something new and distinctive, there is no certain way to determine whether it is a juvenile form or adult form, though of course speculation could be made.

Rather than speculation, what is needed is serious field investigation in this and nearby regions with similar reports, but such would no doubt be expensive and time-consuming. It would probably be easier to solicit help from local individuals, but even that can be problematic, particularly with something as controversial and far from mainstream (even within cryptozoology) as a "dinosaur-like" animal here in North America.

REFERENCES

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